



87 NEPPERHAN AVENUE
LANDMARKING APPLICATION

1. Name of Property: Health Services Building, 87 Nepperhan Avenue
2. Location of Property: 87 Nepperhan Avenue
3. Classification: Public Building
4. Ownership: City of Yonkers
5. Status: Threats to Property: Development/Demolition
6. Description: Art Deco Brick Building with Limestone Ornamentation in good condition.

Submitted: August, 2008

87 NEPPERHAN AVENUE **LANDMARKS APPLICATION**

BUILDING HISTORY

87 Nepperhan Avenue was erected by the City of Yonkers from 1930 - 1933 to house the Yonkers City Health Center.

The Great Depression had been precipitated by the stock market crash of October 1929. Therefore, Yonkers demonstrated a conspicuously high level of civic responsibility and an investment in public welfare on a par with much larger American cities at the time when it chose to proceed with a new public building during that financially perilous time.

87 Nepperhan is designed in the Art Deco style, which is a decorative style named after the 1925 Paris "Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes." The term is applied to a great variety of decorative objects, including automobiles, furniture, lighting fixtures and especially architecture. Among New York City's most familiar Art Deco buildings are the original Rockefeller Center complex (including Radio City Music Hall), the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and the Chrysler and Empire State buildings.

A NOTE ON ART DECO

Art Deco architecture is a consciously modernist style distinguished by simple, massive forms, with flat, block-like planes arranged as setbacks. Often there are clear connections with such antecedents as the simplified forms of Arts & Crafts and "Mission" styles prevalent before and during World War I. There is also a strong influence of the Cubist paintings of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Part of the visual character of Art Deco building façades lies in their characteristic alternation of recessed vertical rows of windows (often with a repeated decorative element between the window stories) alternating with projecting bays of solid masonry. Roof lines are often distinguished by ornamental parapets punctuated by vertically projecting geometric motifs.

Art Deco ornamentation is very eclectic, with simplified, stylized motifs adapted from a variety of earlier styles. The finest examples can include neo-Classical figures, both nude and draped – the most famous example of an Art Deco nude is Paul Manship's monumental gilded statue of Prometheus in the Rockefeller Center skating rink. Other neo-Classical motifs include simplified interpretations of Greco-Roman vases, columns, and ceiling or wall coffers. Art Deco also took

inspiration from African, Asian, Aztec, Beaux Arts (the style of Yonkers City Hall) and very occasionally Gothic motifs. Naturalistic motifs such as leaves, flowers and animals are often stylized, with the elements simplified to emphasize their most vigorous geometrical forms.

LOOKING AT 87 NEPPERHAN AVENUE

If City Hall (1907) represents the apex in Yonkers of the richly ornamental Beaux Arts style, 87 Nepperhan Avenue represents Yonkers post-World War I embrace of Art Deco as an architectural choice for official and commercial buildings. The footprint of the building is T-shape, with the long stem of the T at the rear. Although the principal façade is the most highly decorated, all the façades are faced in the same cream-colored brick with limestone trim. It is probable that the brick and limestone facings were chosen to match or complement the brick and stone facings of City Hall.

Situated immediately to the east of City Hall, 87 Nepperhan Avenue provides a fine visual balance in scale, mass, and stylistic details (discussed below) with City Hall itself. It also forms an integral architectural unit with the two other Katz buildings that flank City Hall, the most important public building in downtown Yonkers. This local complex - City Hall and these three flanking Art Deco buildings - form, in their way, Yonkers' version of the Rockefeller Center complex in New York City. There is even a similar relationship between this Art Deco complex and St. John's Church and St. Mary's Church, both just across South Broadway, and the stimulating juxtaposition of Rockefeller Center and St. Patrick's Cathedral across Fifth Avenue from Rockefeller Center.

Because of its freestanding position relative to City Hall, 87 Nepperhan is well-finished on all sides. The main façade is particularly fine. The chief problem facing 87 Nepperhan is that of perception: the only way to see the building in its full architectural glory is on foot, from the opposite (South) side of Nepperhan Avenue. Unfortunately, most passersby drive by, and the only easily accessible view for motorists is from the Eastern side as you approach from Chicken Island, which is too far away to see any of the building's distinguished architectural detail.

DETAILS OF THE BUILDING FAÇADE

87 Nepperhan Avenue sits very handsomely on the slope of Nepperhan Ave. just to the west of the intersection with New Main Street. Thus situated, it recalls, in relative scale and position, the way the old Carnegie Library used to sit cozily below City Hall at the corner of Nepperhan Avenue and South Broadway before its demolition.

The primary façade is exceedingly fine-looking. Characteristic of an Art Deco structure, a large central bay (six stories) projects outward from two shorter flanking bays (five stories). Within the large central bay itself a smaller five-story bay projects further, lending the whole façade the sense of a series of advancing vertical rectangles and setbacks, a typical Art Deco massing of surfaces. This is subtly emphasized by the design of the roofline, whose parapet presents a series of step-up lines that grow higher as they move to the center.

This theme is carried out at the roof level by the tapering shape and brickwork of the building's prominent chimney and the brickwork and limestone buttressing decoration of the multi-story penthouse which encloses the elevator machinery. What is surprising is that no masonry detail shows any scrimping of the design. Moreover, the combined decorative groupings at the parapets of the main façade and the smaller centermost bay effectively create a double cornice of carved limestone that creates a very satisfying visual climax to the building as a whole.

It is quite feasible to consider that this chimney was designed to echo and complement the central tower of City Hall when seen from the east.

The main door of the building boasts a two-story carved limestone surround of exceptional artistic merit (see enclosed photographs of surround and its details). The limestone itself, like all the limestone facings in the building, is a uniformly handsome cream-grey color with a fine-grained texture. But it is the variety of carved elements that produces a remarkable overall effect. The carved elements are all beautifully conceived, many with a site-specific symbolic connection to the medical nature of the original building. The carving itself is wonderfully executed, with shallow relief work as well as deep undercutting where necessary to create a series of vigorous designs. There are carved limestone ornaments on all the building surfaces. Even the limestone window sills are specifically carved with curving edges that frame the bottom corners of every window.

What sets this building apart from other Art Deco structures in Yonkers is the vocabulary of much of the carved ornament. Though Art Deco is the last 20th-century revival of neo-Classicism, 87 Nepperhan is in part an Art Deco interpretation of the Gothic style of architecture. Over the main entrance, is the formal label "Yonkers Health Center" for which, in common with all the other doorways of the building, the lettering is adapted from an early-Gothic uncial (or rounded) style of the 12th-14th centuries. (see photos) Most lettering on Art Deco buildings is incised; here the letters are all carved in relief, a more work-intensive process, especially because of the intricacy of the uncial letter shapes. Above the second-story level are more carved elements incorporating Gothic finials and suggestions of pointed Gothic

arches along with carved botanical motifs recalling the curvaceous leafy forms of medieval manuscript illumination. There are also carved panels depicting grape vines flanked by pairs of rabbits (symbolic of fertility in marriage, and hence good health) while the other botanical motifs suggest curative herbs used in ancient and medieval medicine. This imagery was evidently chosen specifically for a Health Services Building.

Flanking the elaborate door surround just above the ground floor level are two shallow-relief carved allegorical figures. To the right there is a classically draped bearded male figure holding a caduceus – the wand wound with a serpent that is the familiar symbol of medicine. On the left, a classically draped female figure holds an herb branch. Further ornaments on this door surround include hexagons framing a caduceus within a leaf-surrounded cross (see photograph).

There is a similarity between this decorative treatment and the more obviously “Modernized Gothic” ornament on the primary façade of St. Joseph’s Hospital on South Broadway.

An additional carved motif is an Aztec zig-zag pattern, which is often used as a border of the stonework at various points on the different façades, as well as the parapet at the roof line, and in the brickwork of the chimney. (see photos)

The front doors, with their octagonal panes, were thoughtfully designed, albeit in wood rather than in expensive cast bronze; perhaps this choice was a concession to Depression-era budgetary requirements. The doors evoke both Renaissance Italian church doors and door styles found in other Art Deco buildings and those on celebrated signature Art Deco ocean liners of the era, such as the S.S. Normandie. The bronze lamps flanking the main doorway remain in good condition.

87 Nepperhan is masterful in conception, workmanship and detail and can be said to be the most noteworthy Art Deco building commissioned by the City of Yonkers.

As motorists approach the Yonkers downtown from the east, via the curving slope of Nepperhan Avenue, a distinctive, architecturally varied historic gateway to our city is presented by the arrangement of buildings and topography: 87 Nepperhan, City Hall Tower, and the steeple of St Mary’s Church are strikingly outlined against the horizontal line of the Palisades at the western horizon.

A NOTE ON THE BUILDING INTERIOR

Although this application is for the exterior of the building, it should be noted that the designs of the lobby and of the original corridors, stairways and the elevator were conceived and executed with the same care as the building's exterior; the materials of the original interiors were of very high quality, including polished brown marble, glass-and-bronze stairwell surrounds, fine metal castings for stair banisters, newel posts, the remaining elements of the original elevator doors and cab (all castings now unfortunately painted), etc. The former lobby newsstand is still in place, and though its window is now blocked with plywood the original black walnut counter is in situ, complete with carved elements and panels of matched-grain walnut veneer. These materials, though worn, are worthy of restoration.

BACKGROUND OF THE ARCHITECT

87 Nepperhan Avenue was designed by the architect William P. Katz (1887-1941), a Yonkers native who had attended Yonkers Public Schools No. 2 and No. 10, and later attended high school evening classes in Yonkers. Upon graduating from Cooper Union in 1908 he studied continued his studies at Columbia University and the National Academy of Design. After working as an inspector of steel and tunnel construction for the Pennsylvania Railroad, Katz opened his own architectural office, which was at 45 South Broadway at the time he designed the Yonkers Health Center. One of his earliest extant buildings in Yonkers is the Radford Street Police and Fire Station, completed in 1917 in the Beaux Arts style. He later designed the Jewish Community Center (1929), a handsome modified Classical style building of brick and limestone, which stood at 118 South Broadway before its recent destruction and replacement with a nondescript red brick apartment building. Around the time Yonkers engaged him as architect of 87 Nepperhan Avenue, Katz designed several other noteworthy Art Deco buildings in the vicinity. Most important among them are the Park building (1929) at 20 South Broadway to the immediate north of City Hall, and the First National Bank & Trust Company building (1931) at 30 South Broadway.

SOURCES

Landmarks Lost & Found: An Introduction to the Architecture and History of Yonkers (Michael Rebic)

A History of Architecture (Sir Bannister Fletcher)

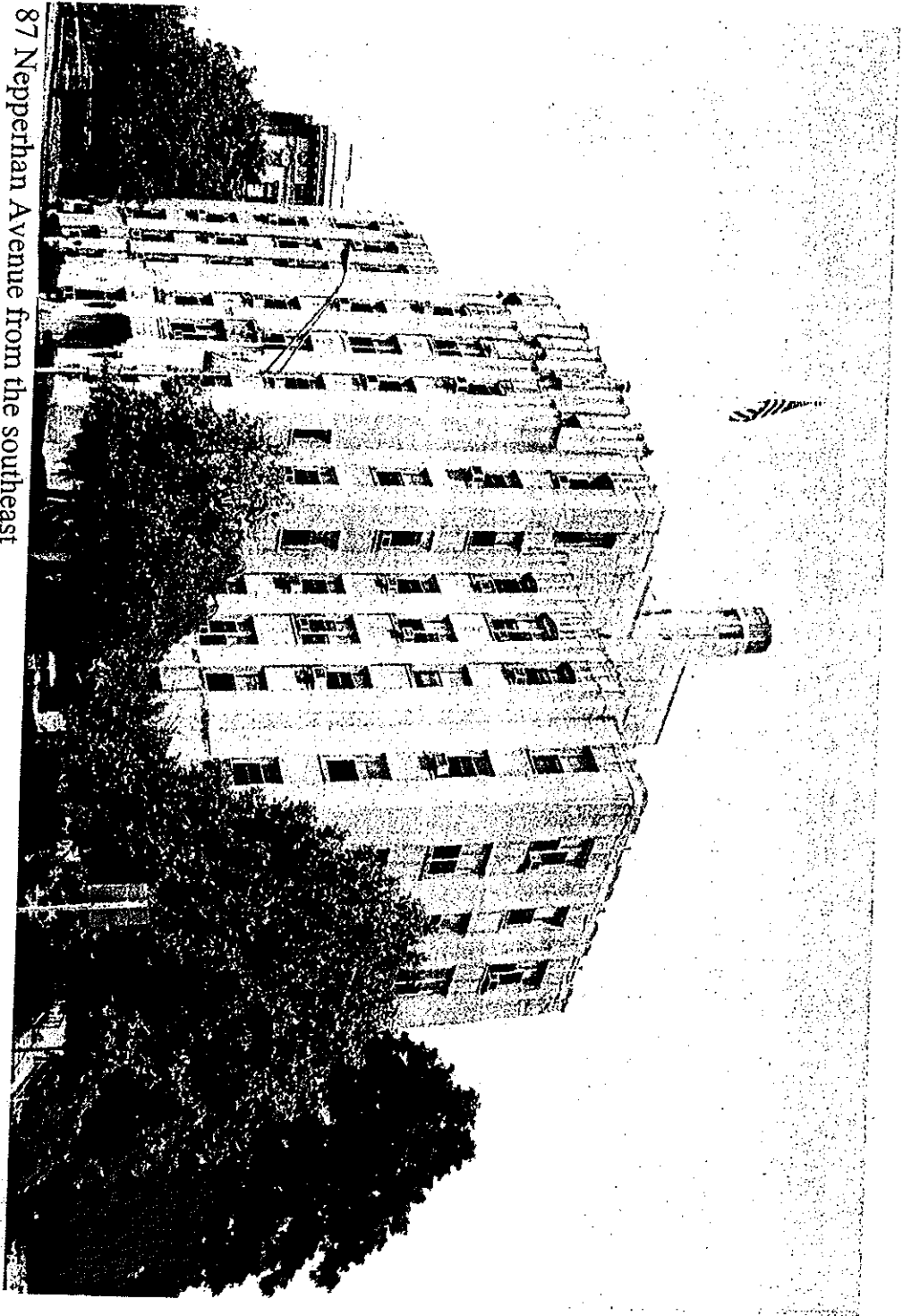
Barrymore Scherer, Historian

Signed

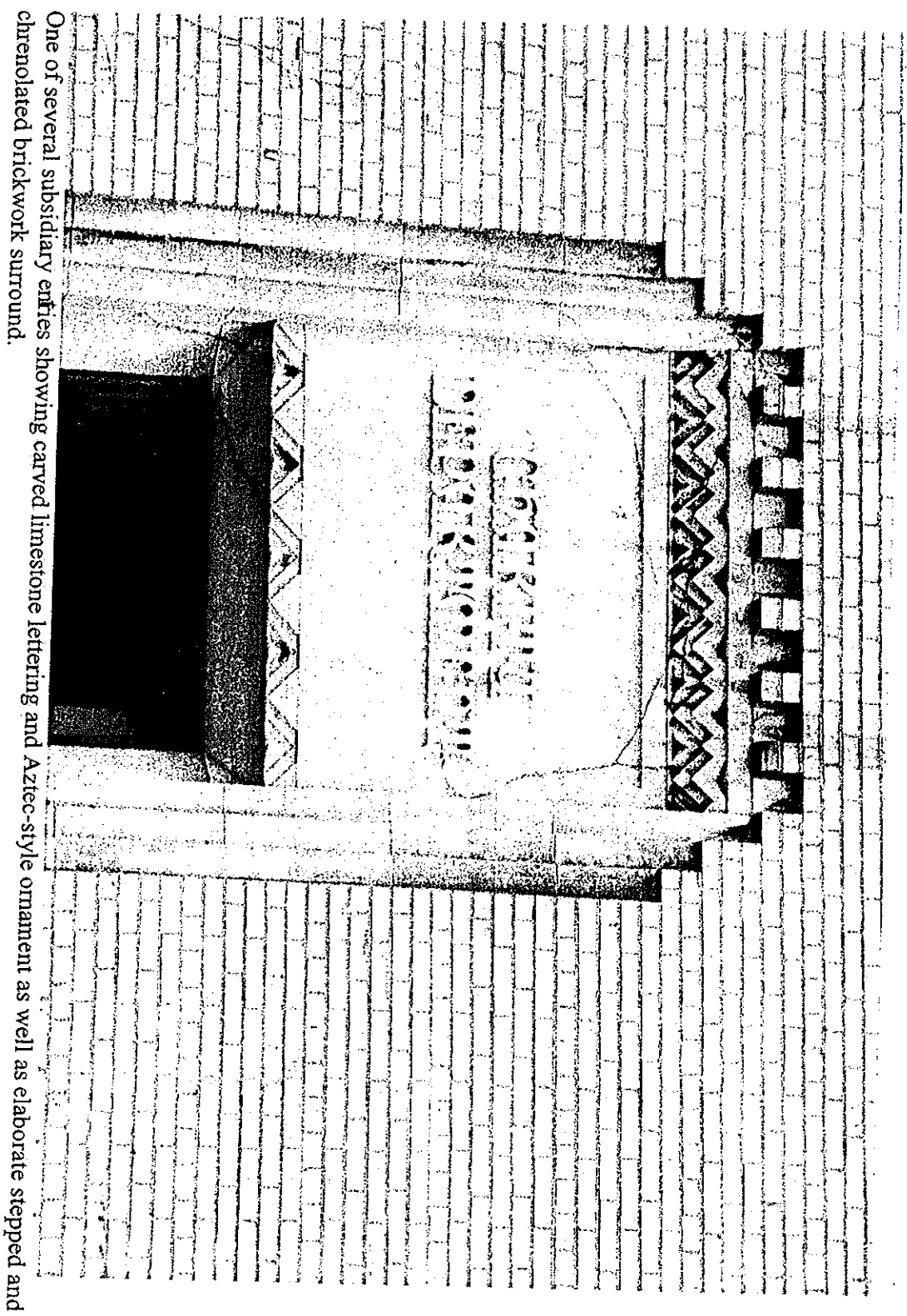
Taffy L. Williams
Taffy L. Williams

Date August 8, 2008

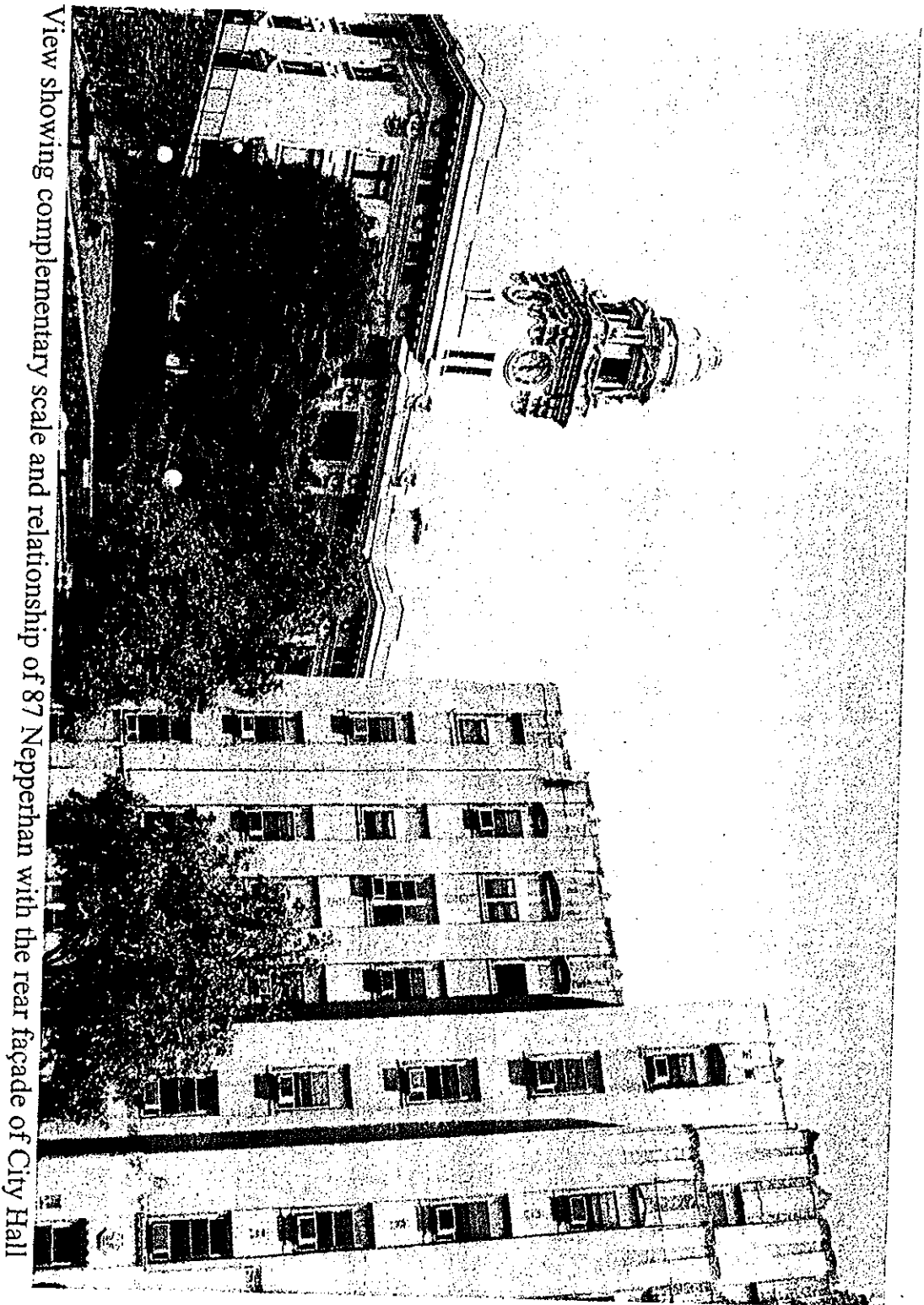
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87 Nepperhan Avenue from the southeast

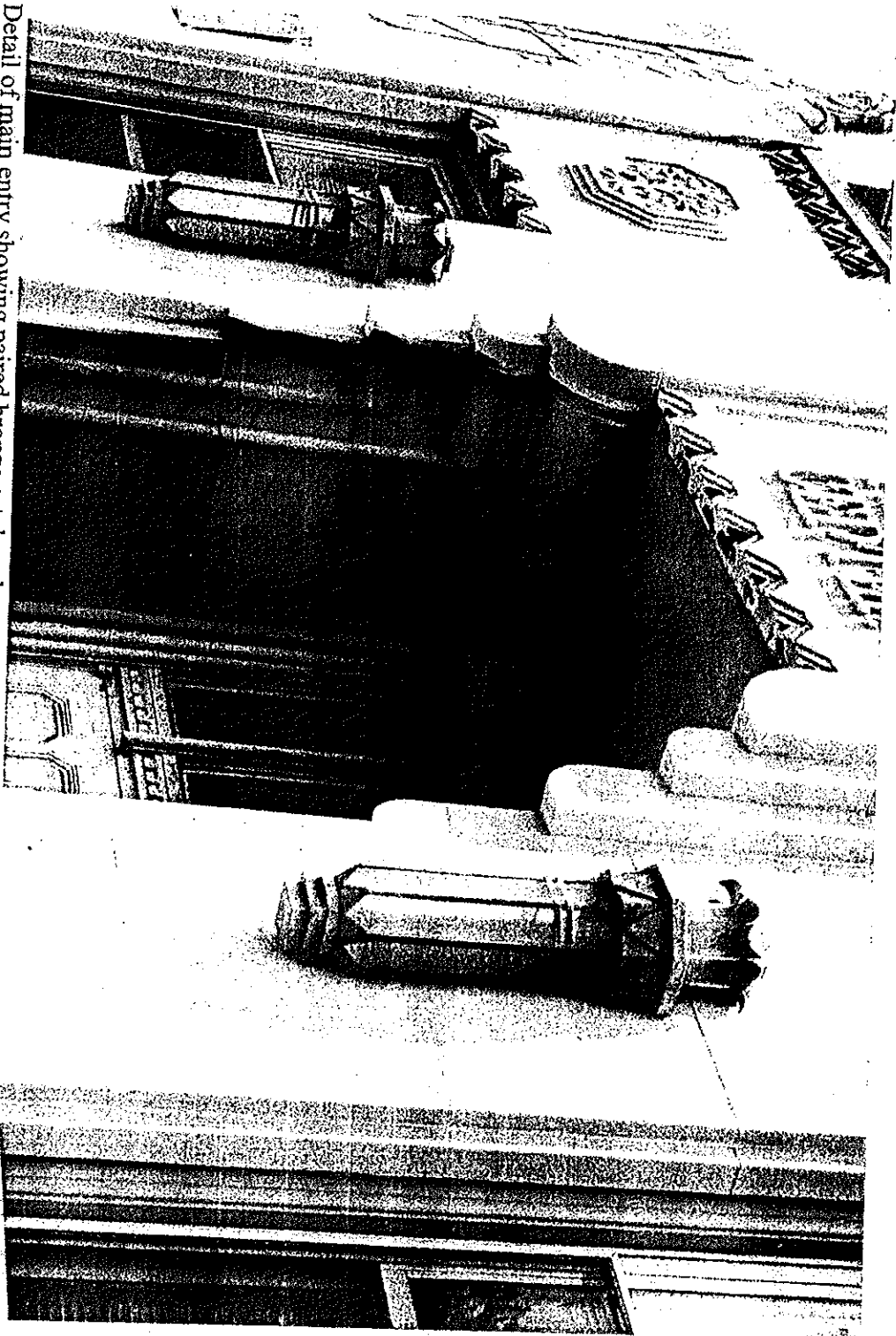


One of several subsidiary entres showing carved limestone lettering and Aztec-style ornament as well as elaborate stepped and chrenolated brickwork surround.



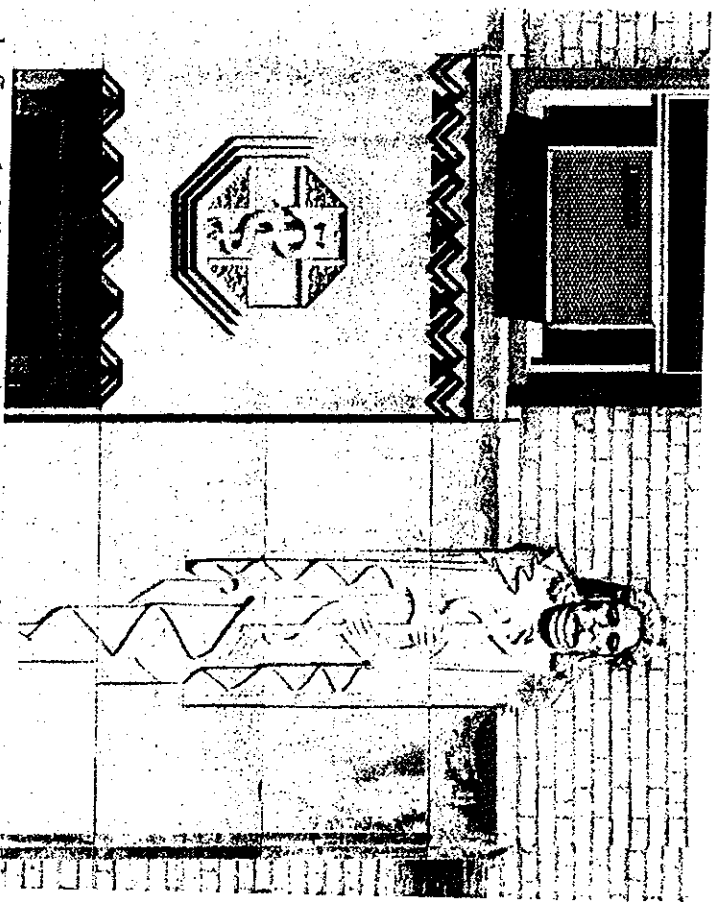
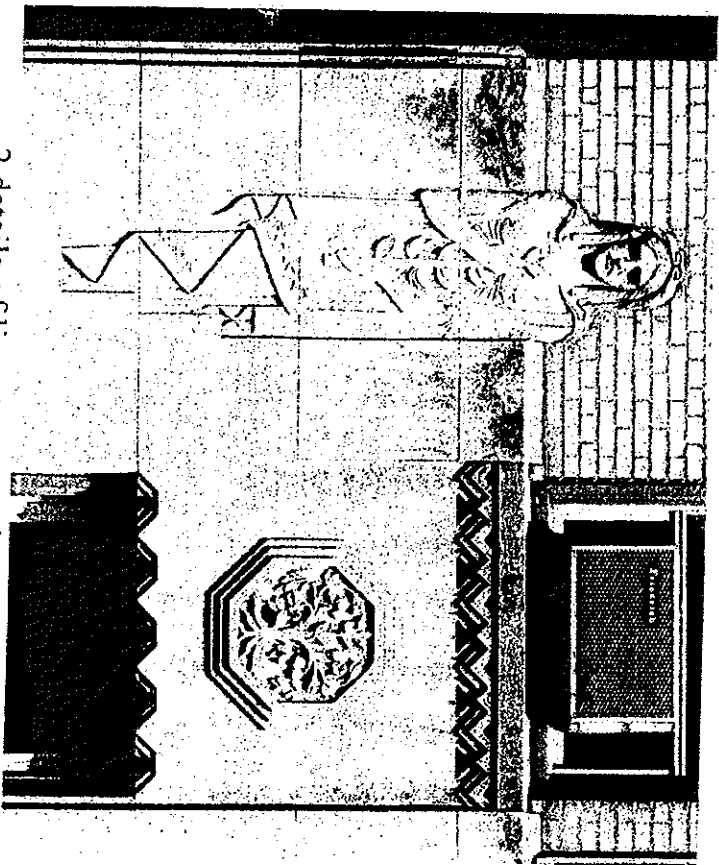
View showing complementary scale and relationship of 87 Nepperhan with the rear façade of City Hall

Detail of main entry showing paired bronze art deco lamps; note Aztec zigzag decoration; also showing high-relief carving of medallions and lettering over doorway and part of the characteristic layered geometric motifs of Art Deco style

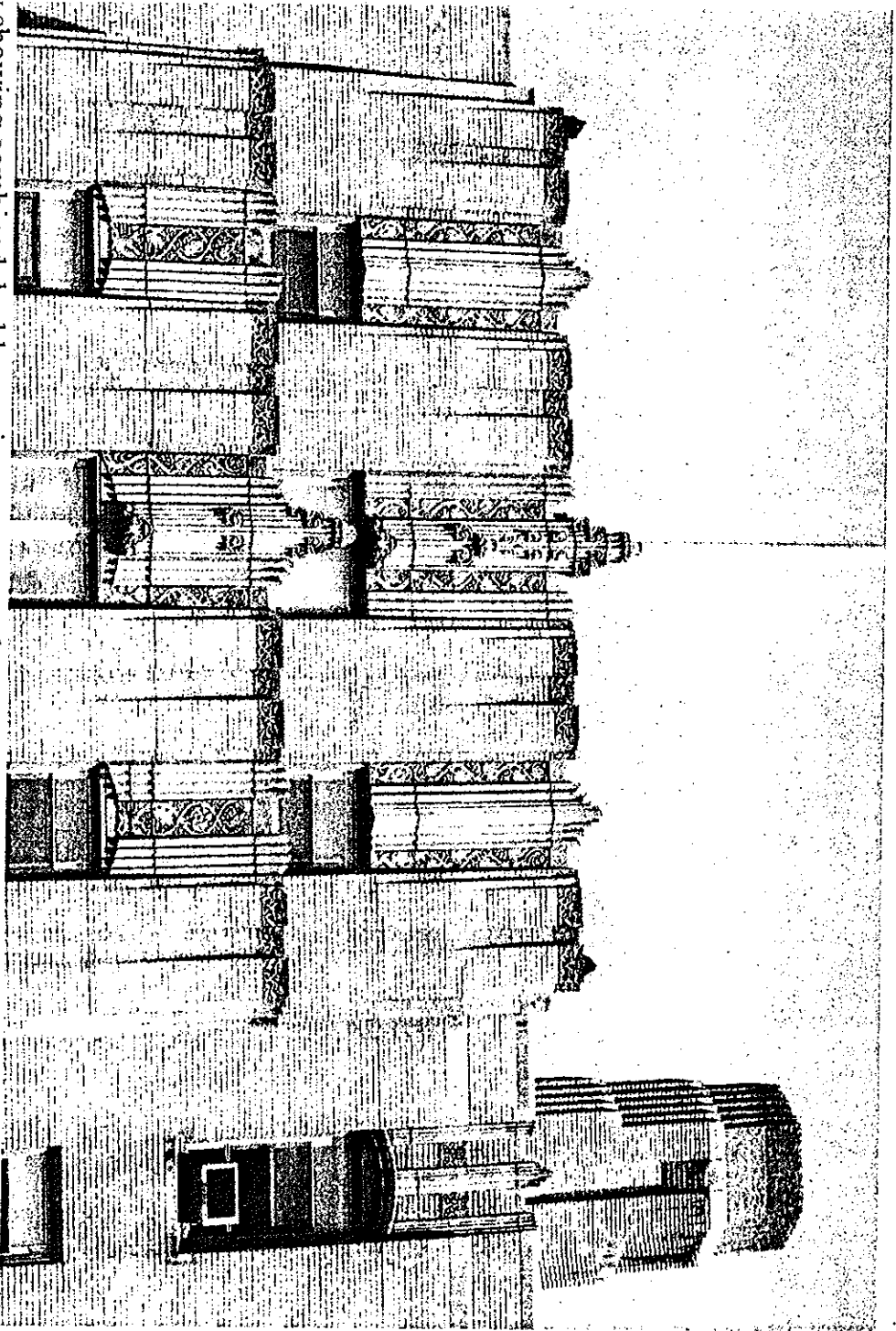




View of carved limestone surrounding of main entrance



2 details of limestone carving on primary façade: (left) female figure holding curative herb; also showing carved medallion; also note Aztec-style zigzag carving below and above windows
(right) male figure holding caduceus; also showing carved medical medallion caduceus against white cross



View showing combined double cornice over center 6-story main façade and projecting 5-story bay; note elaborate neo-gothic carving over center windows and running limestone parapets; also note elaborate chimney brickwork